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Break the nuclear deadlock

By Kofi A. Annan

Regrettably, there are times when multilateral forums tend merely to reflect, rather than mend, deep rifts over how to confront the threats we face. The review conference of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which ended on Friday with no substantive agreement, was one of these.

For 35 years, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, or NPT, has been a cornerstone of our global security. With near universal membership, the treaty has firmly entrenched a norm against nuclear proliferation and helped confound predictions that today there would be 25 or more countries with nuclear weapons. But today, the treaty faces a dual crisis of compliance and confidence. Delegates at the month-long conference, which is held once every five years, could not furnish the world with any solutions to the grave nuclear threats we all face. And while arriving at an agreement can be more challenging in a climate of crisis, it is also at such times that it is all the more imperative to do so.

Let me be clear: Failure of a review conference to come to any agreement will not break the NPT-based regime. The vast majority of countries that are parties to the treaty recognize its enduring benefits. But there are cracks in each of the treaty's pillars nonproliferation, disarmament and peaceful uses of nuclear technology and each of these cracks requires urgent repair.

Since the review conference last met, in 2000, North Korea has announced its withdrawal from the treaty and declared itself in possession of nuclear weapons. Libya has admitted that it worked for years on a clandestine nuclear weapons program. And the International Atomic Energy Agency has found undeclared uranium enrichment activity in Iran.

Clearly, the NPT-based regime has not kept pace with the march of technology and globalization. Whereas proliferation among countries was once considered the sole concern of the treaty, revelations that the Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan and others were extensively trafficking in nuclear technology and know-how exposed the vulnerability of the nonproliferation regime to non-state actors.

The treaty's framers could hardly have imagined that we would have to work tirelessly to prevent terrorists from acquiring and using nuclear weapons and related materials. And while progress toward disarmament has taken place, there are still 27,000 nuclear weapons in the world, many of which remain on hair-trigger alert.

At the same time, the intergovernmental bodies designed to address these challenges are paralyzed. In Geneva, the Conference on Disarmament has been unable to agree on a program of work for eight years. The UN Disarmament Commission has become increasingly marginal, producing no real agreement since 2000. And at the NPT review conference, nearly two-thirds of the proceedings were consumed by debate about agenda and logistics, instead of substantive discussions on how to strengthen the nonproliferation regime.

In my opening address to the conference, I argued that success would depend on coming to terms with all the nuclear dangers that threaten humanity. I warned that the conference would stall if some delegates focused on some threats instead of addressing them all. Some countries underscored proliferation as a grave danger, while others argued that existing nuclear arsenals imperil us. Some insisted that the spread of nuclear fuel-cycle technology posed an unacceptable proliferation threat, while others countered that access to peaceful uses of nuclear technology must not be compromised.

In the end, delegations regrettably missed the opportunity to endorse the merits of all of these arguments. As a result, they were unable to advance security against any of the dangers we face.

How, then, can we overcome this paralysis?

When multilateral forums falter, leaders must lead. This September, more than 170 heads of state and government will convene in New York to adopt a wide-ranging agenda to advance development, security and human rights for all countries and all peoples. I challenge them to break the deadlock on the most pressing challenges in the field of nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament. If they fail to do so, their peoples will ask how, in today's world, they could not find common ground in the cause of diminishing the existential threat of nuclear weapons.

To revitalize the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, action will be required on many fronts. To strengthen verification and increase confidence in the regime, leaders must agree to make the International Atomic Energy Agency's Additional Protocol the new standard for verifying compliance with nonproliferation commitments.

Leaders must find ways to reconcile the right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy with the imperative of nonproliferation. The regime will not be sustainable if scores more countries develop the most sensitive phases of the fuel cycle, and are equipped with the technology to produce nuclear weapons on short notice.

A first step would be to create incentives for countries to voluntarily forgo the development of fuel-cycle facilities. I commend the nuclear agency and its director general, Mohamed ElBaradei, for working to advance consensus on this vital question, and I urge leaders to join him in that mission.

Leaders must also move beyond rhetoric in addressing the question of disarmament. Prompt negotiation of a fissile material cutoff treaty for all countries is indispensable. All countries also should affirm their commitment to a moratorium on testing, and to early entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty. And I hope leaders will think seriously about what more can be done to reduce irreversibly the number and role of nuclear weapons in the world.

Bold commitments at the September meeting would breathe new life into all forums dealing with disarmament and nonproliferation. They would reduce all the risks we face of nuclear accidents, of trafficking, of terrorist use and of use by countries themselves. It is an ambitious agenda, and probably daunting to some. But the consequences of failure are far more daunting. Solutions are within reach; we must grasp them.

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